

Sri Lanka Buddhist Temple – Sentul Meditation Retreat - 2005

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Dhamma [Upāsaka Upāsikā],

During the period of this Meditation Retreat, we wish to build within our devotees a dignified sense of religious discipline which we expect them to carry over thereafter to their daily lives, in the home, the work place and the community at large. Primarily, it shall be the very basis of what we can call meditation in Buddhism. We cannot think of a Meditation Retreat without a serious sense of personal discipline, i.e. a restraint or control over ourselves, centering on it. Through meditation, we attempt to bring about changes in the behavior of people. In Buddhism, we use the Pali word *bhāvanā* to refer to the process of bringing about changes in the life style or culture of a people. The word literally means to develop, 'make grow' or 'culture' as when we refer to tissue culture etc. in the laboratory.

To begin with, *bhāvanā* is primarily the culture and growth of the human, in terms of his moral goodness, i.e. the improvement in the basic inter-personal relationships among people. That is where we begin and where we have to begin. Its initial area of development is called *sīla-bhāvanā*. Buddhism insists that its religious culture [or spiritual culture, if you prefer a more sophisticated phrase], which finally leads to Nibbāna, has to begin with this initial moral culture of *sīla*.

*Sīle patiṭṭhāya naro sapañño
cittaṃ paññañ ca bhāvayaṃ
ātāpī nipao bhikkhu
so imaṃ vijaṭaye jaṭaṃ.*

It spins around a discipline with regard to the way we think, speak and act,

i.e. our thought, word and deed. Very summarily, it is a behavior pattern, something about which we, in the midst of humans, got to be both responsible and careful. And about this, we also need to remember, the law of the land can question us and prosecute us if we do not conform to accepted patterns of propriety. Of course, at the same time, many breaches of that much esteemed propriety can and lamentably does take place, unknown to and unseen by the law-enforcing authorities of the land. This is seen and known to be very common today, everywhere.

Nevertheless, such bad behavior would still come to be condemned by the judgement of the wiser people of the land. We expect this would happen all the time, specially by parents, educators in the land and the religious clergy. Buddhist thinking takes very serious note of this area of moral goodness and calls upon every one to abstain from even the smallest of the offences regarding which the wisdom of the land would frown upon and give a verdict of accusation and chastisement. An excellent Highway Code of Good Living exists among the Buddhists under the name of Metta Sutta which requires people to pay high esteem to trust-worthy Public Opinion. *Na ca khuddaṃ samācare kiñci yena viññū pare upavadeyyaṃ* = Indulge not in any such mean acts of behavior whereby the wise would censure you.

Now a little bit more of serious Buddhist thinking about this. In our daily life, we are led into activity by our thoughts: *cetayitvā kammaṃ karoti*. Our thoughts are the products of our own mind or *mano*. The mind is where our thoughts have their origin and are cultivated and grown - *Mano-pubbaṅgama dhammā mano-setthā manomayā*.

It is important for us Buddhists to know that we human beings do not start our life process for the first time in our mother's womb. We go back in time much further than that. The universe we live in is seen to stretch much further than that in time and space. The stars we see in the sky are indicative of the infinitely vast solar systems in outer space. Do not be too sure about ourselves as being made-

to-order products down here in the market place. We have been in circulation from time unknown. We bring into our lives many things from the past.

We got to accept that a good percentage of the happiness and unhappiness that we enjoy here and now is not unrelated to the behavior pattern we have indulged in our previous and former lives. Verses 1 & 2 of the Dhammapada very specifically express this idea: *manasā ce paduṭṭhena ... dukkhaṃ anveti* | *manasā ce pasannena ... sukhaṃ anveti*. Our success here also depends to some extent on our past: *pubbe ca kata-puññatā ... etaṃ maṅgalaṃ uttamaṃ*. Even our good health and our ability to live a longer span of life depend on our trans-*samsāric* culture. That depends on how much respect we pay, as we live, to the lives of others: *pāṇa-ghātino hi appāyukā* - those who destroy life are short-lived].

The Buddha has referred to our life process as being infinitely vast [*anamataggā ' yaṃ bhikkhave samsāro*] and said that its first beginnings are not easily discernible [*pubbā koṭi na paññāyati*]. Each one of us is wrapped up in a veil of ignorance [*avijjā-nīvaraṇānaṃ sattānaṃ*] and continue rolling on, bundled up by craving [*taṇhā saṃyojanānaṃ sandhāvataṃ saṃsaratam*].

Every time we commence a life process in a mother's womb, even as a test-tube-baby within a surrogate mother, we bring on to the scene within the mother a *samsāric*-continuance to be coupled with the parental contribution called the zygote, carrying with it one's own trans-*samsāric* qualities [pluses and minuses] of efficiency or inefficiency, genius or degeneracy. This is, well and truly, the unquestionable qualitative continuance of humans in the life process called *samsāra*. This is what makes possible the presence of Buddhas and Arahants as well as the less elegant people like Devadattas and Angulimālas. More and more people are now beginning to believe the same about the appearance of Mozarts and Einsteins.

We now commence our Meditation Retreat, promising to go through it while

being established on the higher plane of *Aṭṭhaṅga Uposatha* or the Higher Plane of Eightfold Morality. This alone gives the pursuants of Meditation a firm and solid foundation for a course of religious culture which is worthy of its name. The average lay person, man or woman, is believed to have already disciplined himself or herself on the basis of the *pañca-sīla* or the five basic precepts. He has no fear or dread within himself on any account,

He has offended none through disrespect for life. He has dispossessed none of their legitimately acquired possessions. He is also above board as far as sex relations are concerned. He is impeccably honest in all his dealings. His sanity of judgement is adequately guarded by keeping away from intoxicants and drugs. He is not evilly inclined towards any. Nor does any body have any need to dread him. The observance of *pañca-sīla* immunizes him from the five-fold enmity and dread, i.e. *vera* and *bhaya*. He is unquestionably qualified for complete stability and security for life in the world. He is also on that account guaranteed a good birth after death.

It is such a human, man or woman, who alone is fit to be tested on a launch-pad, for a count-down for a spiritual ascent. In his choice of the *Aṭṭhaṅga Uposatha* or the Higher Plane of Eightfold Morality, he has to be aware that he is facing a twenty-four hour count-down, i.e. a test through a period of day and night [*imañca divasaṃ imañca rattiṃ* as the Buddhist texts clearly specify]. First and foremost, it is the engineers who handle this operation of administering *Aṭṭhaṅga Uposatha* or the Higher Plane of Eightfold Morality who have to know this and be honest about it.

This elevation to the higher plane of eight-fold morality requires, as an endeavor for the acquisition of a higher grade of essential discipline, a seasonal abandonment during a minimum period of twenty-four hours, of certain areas of sensory gratification. It begins with the complete change from moral chastity of *kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī* to one of complete celibacy of *abrahmacariyā veramaṇī* during this period of up-graded training.